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## Leaking mines eyed for cleanup

Heavy metals degrading Cement Creek, Animas River

By Dale Rodebaugh Herald Staff Writer

The old mines around Silverton continue to produce, but not the gold and silver of yesteryear.

Instead they're discharging heavy metals that are degrading water quality in the Animas River and killing aquatic life.

As debate heats up about whether the Environmental Protection Agency will or should get mines in the Gladstone area listed as a Superfund cleanup, an informational public meeting about past mine cleanups and the current Gladstone-area issue is scheduled for May 19 in Silverton.

The meeting is sponsored by the Animas River Stakeholders Group, which formed in 1994 to prevent most of San Juan County from being listed as a Superfund site.

While the EPA helps fund stakeholder projects to improve water quality, some local residents are wary. They fear that designation as a Superfund site means someone else will call the shots and businesses and investors could be scared away.

Peter Butler, the chairman of the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission and La Plata County resident, said Thursday about 800 gallons of contaminated water a minute escape from tunnels around the mining-era community of Gladstone, now a ghost town.

The water unimpeded carries with it zinc, copper, cadmium, iron, lead, aluminum and manganese to Cement Creek and ultimately the Animas River, Butler said.

The metals present no danger to humans, but they kill macroinvertebrates on which fish feed, Butler said.

"The water quality in the Animas at Bakers Bridge is the worst it's been in 20 years of monitoring," Butler said. "Colorado Division of Wildlife data show a definite decline in water quality and the number of fish and macroinvertebrates since 2005."

When giant Sunnyside Mining Co. closed its operations in Silverton in 1991, the firm didn't want to spend an estimated \$800,000 a year to treat 1,200 to 1,600 gallons a minute of contaminated wastewater, Butler said.

The company negotiated a court decree with the state to instead insert bulkheads to plug outlet tunnels. The firm also agreed to monitor zinc discharges into the Animas below Silverton.

The firm spent more than \$20 million doing reclamation, partly to offset any leakage from the bulkheads.

In 2002, Sunnyside passed the responsibility to another company, which ultimately couldn't handle the job. Treatment ceased in 2004, and the plant now is dismantled.

The bulkheads raised the water table tremendously, increasing pressure that discharged acid mine drainage from nearby mines that had been dry. The new discharges total about 800 gallons a minute.

The May 19 meeting in Silverton is designed to educate the public about the issues, Butler said. What can stop or treat the leaks and who will take the lead are important questions.

Interestingly, the American tunnel, which is discharging about 100 gallons of metal-tainted water a minute, is on Bureau of Land Management property, Butler said. The other tunnels, including Red and Bonita, Gold King Number 7 and Mogul, are on private land.

San Juan County commissioners, the Silverton business community, environmentalists and potential investors in new mining ventures are liable to have divergent and ambivalent opinions, Butler said.

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